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Decentralized Cooperation and the New Development Cooperation Agenda: What Role for the UN?

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Introduction

The ongoing changes in the development cooperation landscape, brought about to a large extent by the growing influence of so-called emerging donors from the global South, coincide with an equally significant process of transformation in the inter-state system, which has seen non-state and sub-state actors assume prominence in global affairs. This development is perhaps best captured by the 'complex interdependence' perspective pioneered by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, which conceptualizes contemporary world affairs as a combination of traditional inter-state relations and a web of transnational and transgovernmental exchanges between an expanding cast of actors. This new global environment has been occasioned by far-reaching technological advances, especially in the areas of transport and communication, as well as a broadening of the post-Cold War diplomatic agenda to include issues of 'low politics'.¹

As a function of this interdependence, or what some have described as a system of perforated sovereignties,² local governments have emerged as important players on the global stage.³ As territorial sub-state actors, local governments bring to the new multi-layered diplomatic environment a unique international identity, which combines features of sovereignty-bound and sovereignty-free actors.⁴ This hybridity affords local governments the leeway to be more pragmatic and innovative than national governments in their foreign relations, while still benefiting from some of the policy tools, diplomatic networks and legitimacy that come with being a state actor.

It is not surprising, therefore, that efforts by western aid agencies to improve their development interventions in the developing world in the 1980s and 1990s quickly embraced local governments and their associations as aid delivery agents. The concept of decentralized cooperation emerged in this context to describe mostly donor-funded cooperation between local governments in the North and their southern counterparts, for purposes of supporting local development in the latter.⁵ Although decentralized cooperation was conceived within the framework of North-South cooperation, it has in recent times not only adapted to the new discourse on development cooperation, but also increasingly taken the form of collaboration between local governments in the global South.

This paper examines the evolution and current practice of decentralized cooperation against the backdrop of ongoing transformations in the field

of development cooperation, and reflects on the implications of this mode of cooperation for the UN's peace and development agenda. It argues that in its contemporary rendition, decentralized cooperation embodies much of the current consensus on development cooperation and, therefore, offers the UN and other development actors a complementary mechanism for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Decentralized cooperation in the traditional aid regime

As a concept, decentralized cooperation has generally been interpreted differently by different actors. Although there is agreement that the essence of decentralized cooperation denotes development-oriented cooperation among actors at the sub-state level, the way it is defined by different actors reveals nuances in the understanding and application of the concept. For example, in the context of the European Union's engagement with developing countries, decentralized cooperation is understood as development partnerships involving any domestic actors that are not agencies of the national government. This interpretation differs from the conception of decentralized cooperation by other key development actors such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the French Development Agency (AFD), and the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC). Although their respective understandings of decentralized cooperation do not exclude the participation of a broad spectrum of non-state actors, they are however built on the understanding that cooperation evolves within the framework of a more or less formal partnership between local governments from different countries.⁶

For the purpose of this analysis, we shall borrow Hafteck's synthesis of the major perspectives of decentralized cooperation to broadly define the concept as consisting of "substantial collaborative relationships between local governments [and their associations] from different countries, aiming at sustainable local development, implying some form of exchange or support carried out by these institutions or other locally based actors."⁷

The origins of decentralized cooperation can be traced to the intersection of two distinct but interrelated processes: efforts to improve the delivery and impact of official development assistance (ODA) on the one hand, and the evolution of the international relations of local governments on the other. Although the idea of institutionalized trans-

national linkages that it embodies was not entirely new, the term 'Decentralized Cooperation' is believed to have been coined around the 1980s in the context of new thinking in the dominant western discourse on development policy. As Hafteck notes, the embrace of the social and institutional aspects of development resulted in, among other innovations, the acknowledgment and promotion of the role of a broad range of domestic actors in the development process, including local governments, civil society groupings, and micro-businesses.⁸

The idea of local governments as aid delivery agents was particularly attractive to donors when it became evident that the former possessed certain comparative advantages over non-governmental organizations (NGOs). First, local authorities possessed in-house technical expertise on local service delivery that was not readily available to most NGOs. Second, most local governments in the North could boast significant expertise on medium and long-term planning and budgeting, something most NGOs were struggling with. Third, donors could count on local authorities to make use of established and sometimes statutory consultation mechanisms to involve local communities in international development projects. Finally, as established institutions local governments engaged in international development by choice and not out of necessity, as is the case with many international NGOs whose continued existence depends on donor grants. Added to these comparative advantages was the fact that many local governments, especially municipal entities, already had international experience from decades of municipal twinning or sister-city relationships.⁹

The notions of municipal twinning and sister-city partnerships had been developed in Europe and the US as far back as the 1950s. These largely cultural and symbolic partnerships were founded on a philosophy of citizen diplomacy – or people-to-people exchanges – in the aftermath of World War II, with the primary objective of building bridges of understanding and trust between peoples, and preventing future wars.¹⁰ In the wake of decolonization in Africa, municipal twinning would also be used to link major cities in a number of newly independent African countries with their counterparts in former colonial powers.¹¹ From their simple beginnings as essentially relationships of friendship, peace, and solidarity, twinning and sister city arrangements soon evolved into "complex partnerships fostering reciprocal cultural, educational, municipal business, professional and technical exchanges and projects."¹² Against

the backdrop of efforts to improve the impact of ODA described above, these transnational linkages would later take on the additional role of serving as mechanisms for western donors to deliver development assistance to countries in the South, effectively giving rise to the concept of decentralized cooperation.

In this regard, early practices of decentralized cooperation embodied three dominant logics. First, in the context of changing conceptions around the development process and development policy, decentralized cooperation sought to give expression to the idea of participatory development, a corollary of which was the recognition of the centrality of local governments in addressing development challenges that were largely localized and were increasingly becoming urbanized.¹³ Second, decentralized cooperation was driven to a large extent by the humanitarian impulses of local communities in the developed world, who considered it a moral duty to contribute to alleviating poverty and suffering in developing countries. Not surprisingly, in its earlier rendition, decentralized cooperation turned out to be little more than a one-way transfer of financial and material resources from local governments and communities in the North to their twinning partners in the South, to support community development projects and boost the provision of basic services.¹⁴ Third, decentralized cooperation adopted the fundamental assumptions and principles of the classical model of development cooperation.

As the next section demonstrates, in keeping with the changing context of development cooperation, decentralized cooperation has not only adopted a new and somewhat critical discourse of development cooperation, but has also increasingly become a feature of the South-South development cooperation framework.

Decentralized cooperation in a changing context of development cooperation

The past two decades have witnessed significant changes in the discourse and practice of development cooperation, which have in turn altered the manifestation and focus of decentralized cooperation. The convergence of global trends such as the so-called rise of the South, financial and economic difficulties in OECD countries, as well as a rapidly growing and urbanized global population has opened up space for alternative approaches to the traditional aid model. This has in turn promoted a new global discourse on development cooperation, reflected in the shift from aid effective-

ness to development effectiveness embodied by the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation.¹⁵ Central to this discourse is the construction of development cooperation as horizontal and mutually beneficial partnerships, which should promote autonomous development.¹⁶ As a component of North-South development cooperation, the practice of decentralized cooperation today reflects this discourse. Therefore, although decentralized cooperation continues to retain its aid component, there is a clear trend towards collaborative partnerships, which are built around the exchange of expertise, technology, and experiences, with a strong accent on human and institutional capacity building.¹⁷

A number of North-South decentralized cooperation programmes reflecting this evolution have emerged over the years, among which is the Good Practice Scheme of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum. Funded by the UK Department for International Development, the Good Practice Scheme employs peer-to-peer learning exchanges to support local governments in Commonwealth countries develop the requisite capacity to deliver on the Millennium Development Goals. Although the scheme increasingly works through South-South partnerships, it is designed to match local authorities in the UK with their counterparts in the South.¹⁸ Another example is the North-South Local Government Cooperation Programme, which is funded by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and administered by the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities. The programme supports the collaborative exchange of knowledge, skills and technology between Finnish local governments and their counterparts in the South. It is designed to strengthen the capacity of participating local governments in the South while also delivering concrete development projects to local communities.¹⁹

While the shift from predominantly financial and material donations to capacity building is evident in most of these partnerships, questions have been raised about the extent to which North-South decentralized cooperation actually reflects collaborative and mutually beneficial partnerships. The evidence in this regard is mixed. For example, Bontenbal and Van Lindert argue, in the context of decentralized cooperation between European and Latin American local governments, that “persistent inequalities result in one-way flows from North to South of money, expertise and information.” This reinforces the dependency culture and undermines claims that such partnerships are “sites for

learning for all stakeholders involved.” However, in the same context, they make reference to cases where local governments in the North have adopted ideas and lessons in participatory budgeting pioneered by their Latin American counterparts.²⁰

Perhaps the biggest challenge that North-South decentralized cooperation continues to face stems from the dissimilarity in the institutional, historical and socio-economic contexts of the North and South. This means that local governments in both regions tend to experience different development challenges, and solutions that have worked in the North may not be relevant in the South. It is in this context that decentralized cooperation between local authorities in the South has been promoted as a more relevant approach to capacity building and sustainable development in the South, at least in theory.²¹

Decentralized South-South cooperation (SSC) describes the collaboration between local authorities and their associations from two or more developing countries, anchored in a discourse that is critical of the traditional North-South development cooperation paradigm. In theory, it combines the local level perspective of decentralized cooperation with the underlying philosophy and core principles of SSC, in a form of development cooperation that prioritizes the sharing of experiences and best practices between actors that see themselves as equals.

As a local level expression of the notion of technical cooperation among developing countries codified in the 1978 Buenos Aires Plan of Action, decentralized SSC is founded on two fundamental assumptions. First, it recognizes that progress in developing countries depends primarily on their own efforts and that development cooperation should only seek to stimulate and reinforce local capacities. Second, decentralized SSC gives expression to the argument that because many developing countries, especially those located in the same geographical region, share similar historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts, development solutions pioneered in one southern country can be easily adapted and applied in another. This makes technical exchanges between developing countries potentially more relevant and mutually beneficial than those carried out within the North-South framework. This is the inspiration behind a host of partnerships that have emerged in recent years between local governments across the global South. A classic example is the partnership between Durban in South Africa, Belo Horizonte

and Porto Alegre in Brazil, and Maputo in Mozambique. This partnership evolved as a peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, which enabled the city of Maputo to learn from the experiences of its southern peers on how to manage informal inner-city trading.²²

However, it must be underlined that even though decentralized SSC is seen as a form of development cooperation that produces more realistic and appropriate solutions to the development challenges confronting developing countries, it does not invalidate North-South decentralized cooperation. If anything, in the context of dwindling financial resources for cooperation and growing capacity disparities between local governments in the South, decentralized SSC could in some instances serve to complement or reinforce North-South decentralized cooperation. This prospect has inspired some local governments in the North to experiment with the idea of decentralized triangular cooperation, which essentially allows them to extend the reach of their North-South partnerships by encouraging and supporting exchanges between their southern partners. For example, under the North-South Local Government Cooperation Programme referred to above, the Finnish city of Lahti has brought together its Ghanaian and South African counterparts in a triangular arrangement that has evolved into South-South exchanges between the African municipalities.²³ However, because they do not emerge and develop organically, the South-South exchanges that evolve from these triangular arrangements tend to be fragile and over-reliant on the support of the northern partner.

As a mode of development cooperation that connects local authorities and communities, decentralized SSC may also provide a welcome complement to the largely state-to-state development cooperation approach of so-called emerging donors. In other words, when efficiently coordinated with national mechanisms for development cooperation, decentralized SSC brings in a multilevel perspective that adds value to South-South development cooperation. Brazil's evolving approach to development cooperation reflects an attempt to strengthen the effectiveness of South-South development cooperation by establishing synergies between different levels of cooperation.

In addition to creating different structures to promote and coordinate the decentralized cooperation of Brazilian states and city governments,²⁴ the federal government has also launched two

programmes on decentralized SSC through which it provides direct financial and technical support for Brazilian local governments to share successful public policies with their counterparts in other developing countries.²⁵ However, the example of Brazil's cooperation in Africa also highlights some of the institutional constraints that undermine the effectiveness of a multilevel approach to South-South development cooperation. Although the concept of multilevel cooperation is increasingly being institutionalized as part of the strategic orientation of Brazilian development cooperation, weak processes of decentralization in partner African countries means that little synergy, if any, actually exists in the cooperation activities of the different levels of the Brazilian government in Africa.

Decentralized cooperation and the UN's development and peacebuilding agenda

The preceding analysis has established that from its original conception as an aid delivery mechanism, decentralized cooperation has evolved into a multifaceted and highly flexible mode of development cooperation, which increasingly takes the form of horizontal, reciprocal and equal partnerships. Although in some instances decentralized cooperation still serves as a channel for financial and material donations, for the most part it has been used to promote peer-to-peer learning, the exchange of experience and know-how, as well as provision of technical assistance, with a strong emphasis on human and institutional capacity development. In the context of the growing recognition of the role of effective local governance in sustainable development, decentralized cooperation comes with the potential to contribute to the realization of the global development agenda.

Decentralized cooperation and the UN Sustainable Development Goals

The outcome document of the 2005 UN World Summit underscored the important role of local authorities in contributing to the achievement of internationally agreed development goals.²⁶ In the same spirit, both the Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness and the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, two major global processes that have shaped the post-2015 development debate, underscore the importance of effective local governance in sustainable human development. Local governance, defined as the institutions, processes and systems through which local authorities interact with groups and communities to provide services and promote local

development, is seen to encourage greater participation, ownership, and accountability of development processes.²⁷ Besides, there is a strong consensus that effective local governance, most notably in urban areas, will be required to achieve key sustainable development goals (SDGs) such as eradicating poverty, reducing inequalities and exclusion, and promoting environmental sustainability.²⁸

However, the capacity required for local governments to efficiently assume this role is often in short supply in most developing countries, especially given that decentralization processes tend to transfer responsibilities to local authorities without the corresponding resources. With its current focus on peer learning and technical assistance, decentralized cooperation offers an effective tool for strengthening the administrative and technical capacity of local governments in the South to enable them deliver services with efficiency. Moreover, because local governments in developing countries are more or less confronted with the same development challenges, such as rapid urbanization and urban poverty, decentralized SSC can be a particularly useful mechanism for them to learn from each other about possible solutions and to exchange best practice. Additionally, decentralized SSC allows local authorities of contiguous sub-national territories to pool their resources and collaborate in search of innovative solutions to common problems.

In addition to its contribution to strengthening the institutional and operational capacity of local governments, decentralized cooperation also has the potential to promote democratic local governance, which, as noted above, has been identified as a key requirement for the successful implementation of the SDGs at the local level. As discussed earlier, a major feature and strength of decentralized cooperation is its ability to engage and connect a broad range of local actors including civil society organizations and the private sector.

Decentralized cooperation projects that require local authorities to work closely with different stakeholders in the community could serve as instruments for strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations and encourage greater citizen participation in the decision-making processes of local governments. Furthermore, by virtue of its multi-stakeholder character, recent experiences of decentralized cooperation point to its potential for producing public-private partnerships between universities and private businesses on the

one hand, and local governments on the other. These partnerships have been crucial not only in strengthening the technical capacity of local governments and developing innovative technologies that have improved municipal service delivery, but also in stimulating local economic development. Compared to North-South decentralized cooperation, which features strong civil society and private sector partnerships, decentralized cooperation between local governments in the South remains highly underdeveloped in this area. Most partnerships in the latter are limited to exchanges between local authorities.

Decentralized cooperation in conflict-affected states

The potential for decentralized cooperation to contribute to efficient local governance, either through strengthening the institutional and operational capacity of local authorities or by stimulating healthy state-society relations at the local level, also makes it a suitable instrument for peacebuilding interventions in conflict-affected states. As the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States suggests, building sustainable peace in states emerging from conflict requires not just a capable state that works to deliver peace dividends in an equitable manner to its population, but also inclusive and participatory political processes that serve to legitimize the authority of the state and embed it within society.²⁹

From this perspective, effective and efficient local governance becomes central to peacebuilding efforts, especially if due regard is given to the observation that it is at the local level that the social cleavages and grievances that often erupt into conflict have their roots. Participatory and accountable local governance is by its very nature a conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanism, to the extent that it broadens the space for inclusive decision-making and affords marginalized and minority groups channels to represent their interests. This contributes to alleviating tensions that result from political exclusion or regional disparities.

Moreover, when local authorities in conflict-affected societies are seen to provide basic administrative and social services efficiently and equitably, this helps to restore confidence in state institutions, which in turn furthers the peacebuilding process. Similarly, inclusive and creative processes of local economic development can be the difference between a return to social instability and the

consolidation of peace. This is all the more so in post-conflict societies where the adoption of neo-liberal economic policies tends to heighten conditions of inequality. In post-conflict Mozambique, for example, free market economic policies and economic growth have concentrated wealth in the hands of a few while forcing the rest of the population deeper into poverty. This rising inequality has been partly blamed for the tense socio-political environment that has in recent years threatened to unravel the country's fragile peace.³⁰

Local governments, like most other institutions in societies emerging from violent conflict, are generally devoid of the capacity, resources and morale to assume this peacebuilding role. Decentralized cooperation becomes a viable instrument to address these deficiencies. Technical, financial, material and even moral support from foreign counterparts can assist local authorities and communities in conflict-affected states to develop the capacity, systems, and determination needed for effective and efficient local governance. Decentralized cooperation has a comparative advantage over other forms of interventions to strengthen local governance for peacebuilding purposes, in that it establishes long-term partnerships, which, with sufficient resources, allow for greater adaptability, ownership, and sustainability of capacity building initiatives. Moreover, the exchange of knowledge, experience, and best practice that is characteristic of contemporary decentralized cooperation, especially within the SSC framework, affords local governments and communities in conflict-affected countries the opportunity to draw peacebuilding lessons and inspiration from societies that have gone through or are going through similar situations.

Conclusion: the role of the UN in strengthening decentralized cooperation

As a model of development cooperation that is premised on stimulating the capacities of local communities for endogenous development and self-reliance, decentralized cooperation is without a doubt a useful mechanism for localizing the global partnership against poverty, social exclusion, environmental degradation, and violent conflict. Even so, as an evolving practice, decentralized cooperation is not without its challenges, which have limited its contribution to the global development agenda. Notwithstanding its strong appeal, decentralized SSC, in particular, is yet to fully deliver on its development potential, mainly because of financial constraints and weak pro-

cesses of decentralization in most developing countries. Although, as argued above, whilst local governments in the South possess a wealth of experience and expertise that can be shared with their counterparts in other developing countries, financial constraints often make it difficult for them to undertake durable capacity building exchanges. One of the observed consequences of this financial constraint is that South-South exchanges tend to be deprioritized by local governments in least developed countries in favor of partnerships with northern local governments, which normally bear the full cost of exchanges and in some instances make financial and material donations.

In addition to the limitations and disincentives generated by inadequate financial resources, decentralized SSC also has to contend with a weak culture of decentralized governance in most developing countries. On the one hand, over-centralization of national political and development processes deprives local governments of much needed institutional support to engage effectively in, and benefit from, transnational exchanges. On the other hand, the prevalence of the statist model of local government in many developing countries means that decentralized cooperation has so far not made a significant contribution to entrenching democratic local governance.

As custodian of the global development agenda with significant global legitimacy and access to a variety of development actors, the UN is strategically positioned to contribute to addressing some of the weaknesses associated with decentralized cooperation. The starting point would be for the UN to recognize the contributions of decentralized cooperation to addressing some of the world's pressing development challenges, and make it a priority to strengthen this role by working to mitigate the effects of the financial, technical and institutional constraints identified above. In this regard, the UN could use its own resources to provide financial and technical support to decentralized SSC initiatives. One way to do this would be to include a decentralized cooperation component in the development and peacebuilding interventions of the different agencies of the UN. In fact, a number of UN-affiliated bodies including UNDP, UN-Habitat, FAO, and ILO have been at the forefront of mainstreaming decentralized cooperation in their respective development agendas and activities. These examples could serve as an inspiration and model for a system-wide policy to mainstream decentralized cooperation in the development and peacebuilding work of the UN.

Additionally, the UN should consider establishing an office for decentralized cooperation, which should be charged with supporting and promoting the use of this mode of development cooperation. In addition to mobilizing resources and providing technical assistance for decentralized cooperation initiatives that speak to the UN development mandate and agenda (especially in least developed countries), this office could also serve as a platform for knowledge management in order to foster and facilitate the sharing of information, experience, and best practice on decentralized cooperation.

Another possible way for the UN to support decentralized cooperation would be in the area of strengthening decentralization processes in the South. As noted earlier, decentralized cooperation

initiatives have often failed to fully deliver on their development potential because of the absence of appropriate institutional arrangements at the national level. Such arrangements should strive to strike a balance between the need for greater maneuvering space for local governments on the one hand, and the imperative of state cohesion and accountable local government on the other. Thus, by working with national governments and other development partners to entrench effective and efficient systems of decentralized governance in developing countries, the UN would be creating a favorable institutional environment for successful decentralized cooperation, which not only contributes to strengthening the capacity of local governments but also engenders democratic local governance.

Endnotes

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- ⁵ Alternative terms such as "Municipal International Cooperation", "Municipal Development Cooperation" or "City-to-City Cooperation" have been used to denote this practice. However, "Decentralized Cooperation" is preferred in this paper because it captures the development cooperation activities involving a diverse forms of subnational authorities and not just municipal or city governments. See Pierre Hafteck (2003) "An introduction to decentralized cooperation: Definitions, origins and conceptual mapping", *Public Administration and Development*, vol. 23, p. 341.
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